

On the Uptake

childhood disability LINK



PLAY

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Why a focus on Play? Or Why did we look at Play?

Play is a spontaneous, voluntary, non-structured activity where children can use their imagination and many skills. Play is not only fun but also contributes to the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development of children.

Playgrounds are an important place for physical play and activities but also a space for children to meet and interact with their peers, develop communication and social skills, and a sense of belonging to a community.

Statistics show that every day, more than 800,000 children with disabilities in Canada are denied of the opportunity to fully engage in a fundamental childhood activity: play.

Barriers to playing freely are found at public playgrounds, parks, community centers, libraries, museums, arts and sports facilities – spaces that are meant to be universally accessible and utilized by everyone.

Children with disabilities are at a higher risk of exclusion in several aspects of social participation, including leisure activities and unrestricted use of public spaces, violating their human rights.



Access to public playgrounds is important for children with disabilities as much as for other children; however most current public playgrounds deter children's full participation due to both physical and social barriers.

The **objectives** of the study were:

1. to identify policy-related research articles, acts, legislations and guidelines related to inclusive playgrounds;
2. to gather opinions on the current situation of playgrounds, including needs and barriers that children with disabilities face when using public playground spaces;
3. to make key recommendations to improve the design and development of truly accessible playgrounds.

Who participated in the study?

Children with multiple disabilities (motor, communication, learning, intellectual, auditory, behavioural, visual) and their families, clinicians, educators, orderlies (school support workers) from two schools

and one pediatric rehabilitation center in Montreal, Canada.

A total of 97 participants responded to a questionnaire identifying the features that a "dream inclusive playground" should have and what were the main barriers they face in accessing public play spaces. Other participants joined focus groups in playgrounds and engaged in conversations about barriers and recommendations for inclusive playground.

What did we find?

We identified 10 policy documents and 5 community best practices. Policies, guidelines and our participants highlighted 3 main areas to consider when building inclusive playgrounds:

Physical environment:

- Accessibility and diversity of equipment and design including layout and pathways, surface, ramps, colour contrast and lighting, safety, parking area, incorporating nature, and providing instructions and guidance.

- Equipment should include: benches and resting area, shade areas, drinking water fountain, accessible washrooms with changing table and handgrip/handrail.

Social environment:

- Advocacy and raising awareness of attitudes of other children and parents toward children with disabilities, social play, and communication.

Political environment:

- Make sure to gather children's, families', and community members' perspectives when planning and designing public playgrounds;
- Respect and follow existing standards and best practices guidelines for universal accessibility.

With collaboration with the design team, the results of this project were implemented in the design of a unique inclusive playground for those 2 above-mentioned schools in Montreal.



Childhood disability LINK is a bilingual website Linking Information and New Knowledge on childhood disability to service providers and families. The website also focuses on enhancing the awareness and understanding of research on a variety of issues in childhood disability.

Please visit us at:
www.childhooddisability.ca

Reference:

[1] Movahed, M., Martial, L., Poldma, T., Slanik, M., & Shikako, K. (2023). Promoting Health through Accessible Public Playgrounds. *Children*, 10(8), 1308.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/children10081308>



Take home points for parents.

- From the initial planning and design of an inclusive playground all the way to the completion of the project, children and their families should be actively involved in every step.
- Advocacy and awareness were found as essential factors to promote the creation of truly inclusive playgrounds.

There is a need to educate and empower children and youth with disabilities and their families through rights-based education. This will enable them to better advocate with public administrators on the Human Right to play in all spaces possible.

Take home messages for community members.

- The physical, social, political and environmental factors should be addressed carefully in order to make playgrounds inclusive.

- Therapeutic interventions in playgrounds, as well as free play opportunities have numerous benefits for children. However, the playground's potential can only be explored if they are accessible to children with all types of disabilities.
- Health and education professionals can advocate for municipalities, schools, and public administrators to use the existing regulations and best practices in universal accessibility. They can amplify the voices of children and families in the design and conception of inclusive playgrounds.
- Children and families value exploring different equipment and play opportunities, understanding boundaries, and interacting with their peers in playgrounds. For optimal opportunities, these spaces must consider the whole family's needs (parking, resting areas, shade, water fountains) as well as the possibilities for children of different abilities to play on a variety of equipment and explore different experiences in these spaces.